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ABSTRACT

Getting assessment results used is no easy task. This paper examines the findings of a recent study on the uses of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and suggests implications for increasing use of state and local assessment results. The NAEP study, conducted at Northwestern University, generated evidence that assessment results and methods were employed to make decisions, persuade others, and enhance understanding of issues. These uses occurred in the context of professional activities (the use of results to improve instruction); research (the use of results to understand achievement); and policy development (the use of results by different levels of governance). State and local agencies often exploited NAEP findings and methods to assess student achievement and to identify and address weaknesses in curricular programs, but there was a wide variety of other uses as well. Implications are discussed for assessment planning, meeting heterogeneous user needs, inventing multiple dissemination strategies, providing technical assistance, developing inter-institutional relations, and systematic monitoring of use. (Author/PLB)

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Beyond the Use of NAEP: Lessons for Increasing the Use of State and Local Assessment Results

Summary of Remarks
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Our recent study of the utilization of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Sebring and Boruch, 1982) identified three broad categories of use: professional uses, policy uses, and research uses. Professional use refers to the employment of NAEP data, methods, and materials to ultimately assess and improve educational programs and classroom instruction. Most of the uses by state agencies, local schools, and curriculum organizations fall in this category. Policy use occurs when NAEP data are exploited to inform decision makers such as members of Congress, state legislators, or state and federal agency officials who regulate the use of funds. Research uses refer to the use of NAEP data to experiment with new measurement techniques or to understand the relationship between educational attainment and certain student and school background variables. These broad categories overlap somewhat. Use of data by professionals can lead to advocating certain policies about curriculum emphasis, and researchers' findings can have implications for instruction and for policy.

Professional use by the states mostly involves replicating or adapting the NAEP model to conduct parallel assessments at the state level, which in turn lead to recommendations for curriculum development or revision. Twelve states have replicated and 14 states have adapted the NAEP model. Five of the former and two of the latter were included in this study. In general, these states involved educators in selecting objectives and items for the assessment and interpreting the findings. NAEP data for national and regional samples often functioned as norms against which the state could measure attainments of its students. In most of the states studied, assessment reports are distributed to local schools, and workshops are conducted to share findings and recommendations. In two states studied formal arrangements are struck with local schools to allow them to conduct their own

assessments using National Assessment and state items. Usually states reveal a history of assessment styles, and National Assessment has been an important contributor to this history.

Local districts employ National Assessrent and their state assessment results in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes the objectives are used as a resource in developing curriculum objectives; in other cases NAEP data items, or methods assist with decisions concerning choice of curriculum materials, teacher in-service programs, or development of diagnostic or competency tests.

The national Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) fostered other professional uses. These organizations are two among many that contribute to NAEP policy, use data products of NAEP, and assist in interpretation and dissemination of NAEP results. NAEP findings also served as a basis for NCTM's recommendations for mathematics curricula for the 1980's. Furthermore, a wide variety of journals and magazines, both national and regional, covered NAEP results, and NAEP data repeatedly appear in books on the teaching of reading and writing.

In terms of policy use, NAEP data have been presented to Congressional committees, including the hearings on the reauthorization of Title I in 1978 and hearings on the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981. NAEP has documented cooperation with several federal agencies to provide information pertinent to their programs, and more recently NAEP has begun developing policy papers pertinent to issues before Congress, such as aid to private education and Title I. In addition, case studies of states revealed that state legislatures have employed state assessment and National Assessment data to monitor the condition of education in their state as well as to consider legislation on competency testing.

Until 1979, research use of raw data generated by NAEP was low but not negligible. Transfer of NAEP to NIE led to dramatically increased research use, partly because of NIE's mission and partly because of specialized support for research from NIE and NSF. As a result of the latter, 170 data tapes have been distributed since 1979 for analyses aimed at discovering better methods of measuring and reporting achievement and understanding the relationships between learning and certain student and school background variables.

NAEP data, methods, and materials were employed to make specific decisions, and to persuade others or confirm beliefs. The most common use, however, was for general understanding of issues and problems. Utilization was found to be piecemeal, incremental, and fragmented. It can best be understood as the gradual process of accumulating knowledge overtime and translating that knowledge into program or policy initiatives.

In conclusion, the evidence available on use is sufficient to contradict earlier claims that NAEP is not used. The uses can be documented at each level of government, and by professional organizations, for assessment of children's achievement, curriculum planning, problem identification, and other purposes.

Lessons for Local and State Education Agencies

Some of the recommendations from the NAEP utilization study are relevant to state and local assessment activities. Below we have outlined seven "lessons" for increasing the use of assessment results.

1. <u>The potential user should be represented in the initial planning of the assessment</u>. This is generally regarded as accepted practice and our study simply confirmed the importance of this step.

In all the case studies where NAEP items and/or procedures were used, teachers and other professional staff participated in the planning, the selection of objectives and items, and sometimes in the interpretation of results. It is a recognized fact that early involvement of users will heighten chances of use later on.

2. The fact that user needs are heterogenous should be recognized and accommodated. An important determinant in the widespread use of NAEP materials is their flexibility. For most content areas it is possible to obtain summary reports, objectives, test items and guidelines for conducting their own assessment, reprints of articles, interpretive reports, or data tapes. This flexibility allows the user to select only that product which most specifically meets his or her need.

Likewise, a state or local agency should consider the diverse needs of the audiences it serves. For example, it may be worthwhile to produce several different types of reports. Teachers may want detailed analyses that permit identification of problems in the curriculum or the classroom. Policymakers, such as a school board, legislators, or the state board of education, may desire a more general report that highlights findings, shows relevant comparisons, and suggests policy implications. Administrators may need yet another type of report. Beside providing printed reports, states could offer technical assistance to schools who wish to conduct their own assessments.

3. SEAs and LEAs should establish a policy of encouraging collaboration between their assessment activities and other studies. Special studies could be adjoined to a regular assessment, or the option of augmenting the sample for certain schools or school districts should be available.

For example, a state or local agency may want to determine the correspondence between assessment items and content covered in classrooms. There may be policy issues which could be assisted by adding a set of items or questions to the assessment test. Such arrangements enhance the usefulness of the assessment by capitalizing on the existing sample, methods, and general structure.

In states where assessment offices have limited resources to promote such cooperation, consortium arrangements between LEAs may be possible. In fact, special studies might be conducted by anyone with the resources to do a good job, such as professional organizations, administrators, school boards, or academic institutions.

4. Multiple dissemination strategies are needed to reach and inform diverse audiences. One method is to disseminate information and promote utilization among groups and organizations that have links to relevant audiences. States often have counterparts to such national organizations as the National Education Association, American Educational Research Association, curriculum organizations such as the National Council for Teachers of English, etc. Furthermore, local bargaining agents, organizations of school district research and evaluation offices and regional educational laboratories might be helpful in disseminating information.

Institutionalizing relationships with groups can be accomplished by naming a representative in the organization to keep abreast of assessment activities, regularly reporting to statewide or local newsletters and journals, and arranging poster sessions for statewide or regional meetings. Furthermore, once findings are released, there could be a formal plan for briefing representatives of some of the groups listed above, as well as

legislators who serve on education committees, the press, the state board of education, state officers responsible for Title I Evaluation and Reporting, and so on.

To go beyond printed reports and magnetic tape files, assessment data could be disseminated through public television broadcasts and through the use of microprocessors in government agencies or in the larger school districts. At both the state and local level there should be a system of collecting, cataloguing, and retrieving assessment reports. This would facilitate easy access to data on previous assessments, performance in certain content areas, or of specific grade levels.

5. Cheap systems for monitoring actual use of assessment data need to be developed and exploited. Such a system is critical for assessing the costs and benefits of regular assessments. Our case studies and interviews revealed that most states have little or no evidence regarding use of statewide assessment reports. The same may be true of local districts.

It is important to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data in this area in order to understand the relative frequency of use, to move beyond reliance on case studies, and to make judgments about the utility of assessments when considered against alternatives.

A variety of options can be considered. First, it is conceivable that an inexpensive system of telephone surveys could be set up at the state level or local level to periodically survey the SEAs' and LEAs' uses of the information. Such a system could rely on cheap expert labor, e.g. graduate students, and can reasonably be expected to result in an annual report on use. Periodicity of such surveys is important because of the influence of memory lapse on reports of use.

Where telephone surveys are not appropriate, mail surveys of a probability sample of LEAs might be. They are less likely to be satisfactory because obtaining reliable information about use requires some probing and guidance. The word use evokes different images for respondents, and memory failure and self interest may play a role in responses. Routine administrative reports on use by all SEAs and LEAs does not seem sensible since probability samples would be accurate. Moreover, requiring a system imposes further burdens on respondents, and our experience with administrative reporting on use in other sectors suggests the approach is not promising and can lead to gratuitous reports.

Another vehicle is to include prepaid post-cards in each report along with a request to return them with information on use. This is unlikely to lead to an unbiased sample. In addition, small side studies would have to be run to assess quality rather than quantity of use. Some use is likely to be inept and other use remarkable. Cooperative arrangements between states or between local schools seems desirable because variations in practice can illuminate what works and why.

6. Monitoring systems should define use explicitly in terms of audience, type of use, function of use, and the elements of the assessment that are used. How we view use of assessment findings depends on our definition of use. Moreover, decisions at the state or local level about continued participation in assessments, investment of resources for augmented samples or special studies cannot be made without a reasonably clear idea of what the word implies. Finally statistical studies of the scope and frequency of use, and costs and benefits cannot be made without better definition.

We suggest that in policy statements, evaluations of assessments, and in legislation, that use be defined in terms of

- audience, i.e. state legislators, state and local agency officials, educational organizations, school boards, teachers and other local school staff;
- function of use, i.e., identify problems, make decisions, increase understanding, and persuasion;
- elements of use: test items, objectives, sampling methods, summary reports, technical assistance, etc;
- and type of use, e.g. professional, policy, and research.

These categories are applicable as well to gauging use of other kinds of information at the state and local levels, including use of special program evaluations and use of administrative reporting systems such as the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System.

7. Finally, it is important to recognize the constraints on the use of information. Even when multiple strategies for dissemination are employed, spread of information remains imperfect. Furthermore, even when state agencies and schools gain a better understanding of student needs through assessment reports, they may not have the resources to implement changes suggested by the assessment. Decisions do not turn on information alone. Assessment reports and results may be only one element among many that are considered and can easily be outweighed by bureaucratic, budgetary, and political factors.

Reference

Sebring, P. A. and Boruch, R. F. On the uses of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Unpublished manuscript. Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University, Department of Psychology, 1982.